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Cashing in across the Golden Triangle: Thailand's Northern Border Trade with China, Laos, and Myanmar

THEIN SWE and PAUL CHAMBERS

Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2011, xx+192p.

This book is an interim report on the Thailand-China border trade and particularly on two roads constructed under the Greater Mekong Subregion project.

The first of these roads, R3B, was completed in 2004. It runs from the Thai border at Mae Sai through the Shan States of Burma to the China border at Mongla. It's not doing very well. Traffic is occasionally disrupted by ethnic insurgents. The Burmese government repeatedly closes the border crossing to display political pique. The road surface is already falling part. The daily value of goods passing the Mae Sai checkpoint is only half the daily take of one of the three casinos on the Tachilek side.

The second road, R3A, running from the Thai border at Chiang Khong across Laos to the China border at Boten, was completed in 2008. Its utility will increase when a new bridge is built across the Mekong at Chiang Khong, now scheduled to open in June 2013. Even then, Chiang Khong is remote from Thailand's main road or rail network so the ultimate value of the route is still uncertain.

At present more traffic is still carried on the river route down the Mekong to Chiang Saen which is slower but cheaper and viewed (at least until recent shooting incidents) as safer and more reliable. On all three routes, most of the traffic is typical border trade, food and consumer goods. There is a little resource extraction to China, mostly rubber and refined oil, which now passes

along the Laos road. None of these routes yet offers a serious path from inland China to the sea.

Chinese economic influence is seeping down these routes. This is most in evidence at the border towns of Boten in Laos and Mongla in Burma, which the authors describe as basically Chinese towns. But there are also big plans to expand Chinese investment in Thailand around Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen. These plans have provoked mixed reactions in the localities.

Thein Swe and Paul Chambers repeat allegations about China's manipulation of Mekong water flows to favor Chinese shipping, and about the unequal gains from the Thailand-China Free Trade Agreement, but offer no deep analysis. They suggest that decentralization has shifted policy-making on border matters more to the local arena, but the evidence is thin. They constantly predict greater trade and economic contact in the future, but such reports always have this optimism.

By focusing closely on these two routes, the book seems to miss the big story of this border region. By 2015 China will complete a pipeline and high-speed railway from Kunming through Ruili to a deep-sea port on Burma's Arakan coast.

The authors have collected a great deal of valuable data on the border trade. Their account describes how high-flown ideas of "subregional economic cooperation" come down to earth among the wild and woolly affairs of ex-drug lords, casino operators, frontier mining entrepreneurs, and ethnic insurgents.

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